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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S CONVERSATION WITH PM DZURINDA

Classified By: Ambassador R.M. Vallee for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶11. (U) The Ambassador and his wife hosted Prime Minister and Mrs. Mikulas Dzurinda for a private dinner November 22. They agreed that relations between Slovakia and the United States had never been better. Following are informal notes from the conversation.

Dzurinda on President Bush, and Possible White House Visit

¶12. (C) The Prime Minister believes he and President Bush have an especially warm and personal relationship. Dzurinda was pleased that the President twice singled him out at multilateral meetings, once at a table where he talked with Dzurinda to the exclusion of jealous colleagues, and once in the White House where he kept Dzurinda after others had left to give him a pair of cufflinks and to chat. It is obvious that the President's visit to Slovakia added to this perception, and Dzurinda highly values a potential visit to the White House in the spring.

Politics: "I'm a Marathoner"

¶13. (C) The Ambassador and Dzurinda discussed the September 2006 parliamentary elections. The PM said the feel of the street (he has visited 82 villages in the last 9 months) contradicts the polls (which show SDKU as low as six percent), although he is concerned that the natural pendulum of politics, voter fatigue, and the need for a new face works against him. He feels that, despite periodic intracoalition disputes, there is a natural alliance between his own Slovak Christian Democrat Union (SDKU), the Christian Democrat Movement (KDH), and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK). His continued good private relations with these partners makes it unlikely they would abandon him for an alliance with Robert Fico's Smer ("Direction.") (Comment: We would not rule out KDH or SMK alliances with Smer. In the November 26 regional elections, Smer-KDH coalitions were particularly successful. End comment.) Dzurinda admitted a certain personal tiredness, but said that when he considers a Smer-HZDS-SNS-KSS possible coalition he gets reinvigorated ("remember I'm a marathoner") to ensure continuity of his reforms.

¶14. (C) According to the Prime Minister, Eddy (Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan) is a great resource, Finance Minister Ivan Miklos is the "brain" of the SDKU operation, and the PM is the political "nose." He has been surprised and very pleased by the performance so far of new Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Iveta Radicova. She came from the NGO world and did not have political experience, so it was a gamble by SDKU to name her to the position. He has reached out to HZDS--particularly center-right members like Tibor Mikus (head of the parliamentary committee on European affairs)--and thinks he could work with the party. He conceded that HZDS needed Vladimir Meciar to generate any enthusiasm among its electorate before the election. Post election, Dzurinda envisioned HZDS ministers, but did not see a government role for Meciar, even as Speaker of Parliament. He characterized Meciar as old, tired, and a spent force, who would be satisfied, in the PM's view, with party chairmanship in a coalition partner party.

Airport Privatization and Austria

¶15. (C) The PM had a surprising response to the Ambassador's query about possible Austrian control of Bratislava's Stefanik Airport, with Schwechat airport one of the remaining bidders. While noting that he "did not involve himself in tenders," Dzurinda thought that "cooperation" (with Austria) was sometimes better than competition. He reasoned that a highspeed tram connecting the Bratislava and Vienna airports plus the strong opposition of the Greens to expanding Schwechat would bode well for Bratislava even with Austrian control of the airport. He also said that there was nothing stopping the winning bidder from flipping the airport to the Austrians anyway, and it was better that the Slovak taxpayer received that spread.

16. (C) On European relations Dzurinda was extraordinarily frank. He pointed out that he personally called Aznar and asked to be added to the coalition of the willing prior to the Iraq war. He seemed gleeful that the new Central European member states, combined with Britain, moved the EU from an organization that "simply parroted the talking points of the French and Germans." Apparently, before the election of the last EC Commission head by the European parliament, he was yelled at by Chirac for opposing the French nominee

("merely a schill for the French"). The PM pointed out to Chirac that in democracies the plurality rules, and Chirac didn't have the votes.

17. (C) Dzurinda noted that both Schroeder and Chirac know that President Bush has done the right thing in Iraq, but they cynically tap into their electorate with the anti-Iraq message simply to get votes. He delighted in the fact that Tony Blair had joined the EPP caucus for discussions and smiled at the irony. With reference to President Bush's current approval rating, he noted that leadership requires courage when doing the right thing, and recalled the political abuse he suffered in Parliament for granting NATO overflight permission during the NATO bombings of Serbia. "Now, 65% of my countrymen approve being part of NATO...And look at Croatia now, all I see on Galaxie (the local sports channel) are advertisements to visit Croatia." Dzurinda called Chancellor Merkel, "the new Iron Lady." He marveled at how she spoke openly at their first get-together of raising the retirement age to 68 in Germany. "This lady is tough, and I look forward to working with her," he noted.

18. (C) The Ambassador thanked Dzurinda for Slovakia's growing positive role in international affairs, which will only be enhanced as Slovakia takes its seat on the UN Security Council in January. He encouraged the PM to work with us on helping in the Balkans.

Pavol Rusko

19. (C) Dzurinda confided to the Ambassador that former Economy Minister Pavol Rusko's accident, in which he allegedly shot himself in the leg while cleaning a hunting rifle, was rather suspicious. Rusko has a lot of debts to unknown "business partners." Furthermore, revelations that he has been secretly taping conversations with former members of his ANO party have made many people nervous. Rumors have been flying around Bratislava that there may be more to the incident than meets the eye.

Environment and Tourism

110. (C) The Prime Minister was very thankful for Embassy efforts to bring U.S. experts to help bridge technical, and to some extent political, gaps in the current debate over development in the storm-ravaged Tatras, and the Ambassador pledged to continue to help. Dzurinda added that he was not concerned about the (slow) pace of tourism development since he wanted to make sure it was done in the right way.

VALLEE

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